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The Limits of Territory and Terrain

This response outlines the intention of thinking critically about terrain as a way to think about the political materiality of territory. It responds to the interlocutors particularly around the themes of place, geology, depth, Eurocentrism and the relation between human and physical geography.

Key Words: Geography Geology Place Terrain Territory

The purpose of writing the article (Elden 2020) was to continue work on the question of territory, and in particular to use the concept of terrain to think about territory's political materiality. I was using terrain in this piece, and some earlier writings (especially 2017), in order to go beyond the limits of my previous work on territory.

But the piece itself was of course also limited. It was certainly not able to think about terrain in all of its complexities, but rather to begin to sketch how terrain might be understood in relation to territory. It was not therefore suggesting that terrain was the answer to thinking about materiality in geography in general, though I hope it might be helpful in that work. Nor was a single article adequate to thinking about terrain itself as a topic, though I do think that it remains underexplored. And the article only begins to discuss the rich history of the concept of terrain in geography. Crucially, in this piece the aim was to use terrain to add depth and nuance to work on territory. It certainly wasn't suggesting that the two were synonymous, and nor was it suggesting territory was the only, or even the best, way into the question of terrain. In this I certainly agree with Gastón Gordillo's point that "territory is not enough to grasp terrain", and I am interested to see how he develops this work on terrain itself in his promised future book.

Part of the purpose of my work over more than a decade has been to break from the idea that territory was a fixed frame within which politics happened. Along with many others I have been trying to make that argument in a variety of ways. One key aim has been by insisting that the concept of territory has a complicated history, and that the straightforward definition which is so often taken for granted is actually historically produced. Another aim has been through suggesting that while territory as a concept can be given a history, the particularities of every territory are constantly in process. Territory is a process of making and remaking. It is only relatively recently that the idea that the boundaries of states are fixed has become the norm. There are of course exceptions, but international law does seem to operate with that as a fundamental principle. But even if they have fixed legal boundaries, territories are certainly not unchanging. Some of this is a human-led process of transformation of landscapes, border fortifications, military and extractive practices. But as this piece tried to show, it can also be through geophysical processes, and importantly the interaction between these and human endeavours.

These indications hopefully situate the claims I made in the original article, and begin to indicate how my discussants respond to it. The proposals of the article were based on a reading of a literature which is wide-ranging and ever-growing. Some of the claims, especially about land and terrain, were a self-criticism or development of earlier proposals I had made. And this was, as the article said, an attempt to make some of the initial

connections between diverse literatures. Of course, there were things that I did not do, either by neglect or design.

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Kimberley Peters draws some very interesting connections between the work I did here and debates about place. Gordillo also suggests that place is absent from my review. In my earlier work on territory I learned much from work on the concept and practice of place, both within geography and outside the discipline. This was also the case in some of my earliest work on Heidegger and Foucault and the relations between space, place and history (2001). The work of Jeff Malpas and Edward Casey was particularly inspiring, and I found Casey's *The Fate of Place* useful when I was working on *The Birth of Territory* (2013a), both as exemplum and for its detail (Casey 1997; see Malpas 2018 [1999]). I am sure that there is more which work on territory and terrain can learn from place, and Peters points to some important themes. In particular I am struck by her rereading of the geographical (as opposed to the philosophical) tradition of work on place, and how this already indicated some of the themes I was trying to explore here. She rightly shows a number of the ways that the work on place made significant claims which I, rather unconsciously, echoed in this piece. Could place also be a supplement to theorisations of territory? Yes, and in my earlier contributions to this debate some, albeit partial, reference was already being made. But this dialogue should not, I think, be continued by suggesting that place "is fundamentally about territory". Territory, for me, is a more specific concept than that. And so I return to the point about this article being about trying to use terrain to think further about territory. Place can certainly be another thread of that conversation.

In his response, Bruno Latour rightly indicates that we need to be careful in positing physical and lived space as distinct, and then trying to combine them. The attempt to read across human and physical geography in my piece might have contributed to this appearing to be my intention. But one of my long-standing inspirations has been Henri Lefebvre, who proposed consideration of a lived experience of space not as an opposition to the physical, but as a third term to the physical and mental ways of understanding space (1991). How this maps onto the intellectual division of labour within the discipline of geography is not straight-forward. Measure and calculation are certainly key themes which I've tried to explore, but not by seeing this in straight-forward relation to the physical, but rather as part of the work on the notion of political technology. But I don't accept the characterisation of the discipline, let alone of my work, before the Gaia hypothesis. Space has never been the backdrop, the container. It has always been more complicated. I therefore hope that what I'm doing is not falling into the traps Latour rightly indicates, though there is undoubtedly more to learn from his approach.

Deborah Dixon provides some really interesting examples of how work on the history of geology might shed further light on the concept of terrain. She suggests that this is where we can situate some of the most "interesting, conceptually driven work on terrain in the Earth Sciences". This seems a really productive line to explore, and I'm interested to learn more. One question in this piece was the way that terrain had become form and not process, which was something I wanted to challenge, and here I was trying to begin to think about how this might have come about. For that, some initial thinking about geomorphology seemed a good way into the question. But any work on terrain more generally would surely have to engage with geology as well, and Dixon's initial orientations here, as well as in her wider work on the topic, are extremely helpful in this. One benefit, as

Dixon's response indicates, is that this is another way to break from the surface-level approach to terrain, and to further explore complexities of depth.

Depth is also crucial to Rachael Squire's response, building on her fundamental work on the sub-marine, but going in some other directions. One of the things that is so important about Squire's work is the situation of bodies in the terrain, the immersive analysis (i.e. 2016). I do recognise that my work is not adequate to the relation between bodies and terrain, though in part the work I've been doing on territory recently has been an attempt to respond to criticisms such as those by Peter Adey (2013) of my initial work on volume (Elden 2013b). Additionally, such work needs to deepen its dialogue with other parts of the discipline of geography. Territory has largely been the focus of political geography, but here I was trying to connect some of the ways in which military geography and physical geography might be understood in relation to terrain. Socio-cultural geography, as Peters insists, has long thought about the material and the more-than-human. More needs to be done with work on the non-human in relation to terrain, as Squire indicates. Some of the most impressive work recently has been within historical geography (i.e. Della Dora 2021), and work like this, as well as in the history of science generally, may well be a model for future research on terrain. Equally, I have done some of my work on territory in dialogue with urban geography (Elden 2019), as well as with other disciplines. Squire is therefore certainly right to stress the ways in which we might take materiality of territory seriously, which will necessarily exceed anything I can do alone (see Jackman et. al. 2020).

The charge of eurocentrism is harder to accept. Part of the purpose of thinking about terrain and materiality was a recognition that the Western concept of territory was often based on a relatively stable relation between human and physical geography. But the work of the ICE-LAW project – which included anthropological and indigenous perspectives – convinced me that if the physical geography was not as stable then this required some rethinking of the nature of territory.ⁱ Outside of Western, temperate Europe, the malleability of the landscapes being divided into territory required thinking really seriously about materiality. Climate change is exacerbating this, but many of the processes are not themselves new. In this piece, and some other writings, I have been trying to use terrain as a way to account for that – in other words to develop the question of territory to be useful outside of European contexts (see also Halvorsen 2019). That the understanding of terrain I have drawn upon is still bound up within European histories is something I am willing to concede. It was an initial sketch of these ideas, and more certainly needs to be done. Thinking about indigenous and other non-Western understandings can be really helpful, though some of this may be about terrain itself, rather than how it can be used to understand territory. But the intention at least was to break from a European understanding, not to reinforce it.

As I stress in the article, I think that terrain is the “best concept we have for understanding the political materiality of territory”. I wanted to see that materiality not as something fixed, but as dynamic, and stressed that terrain itself should be seen as a process, “continually made and remade, transformed by geophysical and human transformations”. In my proposal, terrain was “a supplement to theorisations of territory; it forces them to account better for the physical, material nature of the spaces to which human actors lay claim, which they live in and shape”. Terrain, as I stressed, was not an unproblematic concept, and had a history in military geography which needed to be recognised and critically discussed. As Dixon recognises, we need to “remain attentive to how such concepts arrive having already undertaken particular kinds of work; work that may be obscured in the fields and folds of

our discipline but might nevertheless be a productive reservoir moving forward". As I try to show in the article, its use in physical geography and military geography could both be an inspiration and a critical limit. I began to sketch some of those histories and complexities in the piece.

* * *

I confess I have found returning to these ideas difficult. It is eighteen months since I wrote the paper, delivered in August 2019 but completed a little while before in order to give my respondents a written text to read ahead of the event. At the time, writing this piece felt like a culmination of work I had been doing on territory for well over a decade. Even at the time of the conference I had been going in different directions with my work – a series of papers on Foucault and Shakespeare, as well as the final stages of the work on the third volume of my intellectual history of Foucault's entire career. A few years ago, I had thought I might write a book on terrain as the political materiality of territory, but was unsuccessful in getting funding, and other themes became priorities. Since the pandemic began, work on the Foucault project has slowed substantially, but in the distance I can see the end of the fourth and final volume. After that is complete, I may return to the Foucault and Shakespeare work, but another intellectual history project has become an interest, and this will take me still further from the question of terrain.

The question of when or whether terrain, or indeed territory, become my focus remains uncertain to me. As the references to the initial piece tried to show, there is a large and growing literature on related themes which I was able to draw upon. But as the responses show, there are many other questions and literatures which I neglected. I am grateful to my interlocutors for their engagement with the ideas here, and for pointing to some of the future directions that work in this broad area might take. I look forward to reading their and others future explorations of these and related themes.

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ⁱ The project website is archived at <http://icelawproject.weebly.com>